

# Trauma Informed Strategies for Educators

According to SAMHSA (2015), a trauma-informed approach includes the following **core principles**: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and acknowledgement of cultural, historical and gender issues.

Trauma-informed strategies benefit all students, though they are especially necessary to support students who have experienced trauma. The following guidelines are best practice recommendations for implementing these strategies in schools.

- **Connect and Support:**

- Implement your school's PBIS program consistently.
- Develop routines and be consistent in using them.
- Maintain clear behavioral expectations. Praise publicly, correct privately.
- Focus on problem-solving, not punishment. Help students develop ways to manage their own behavior.
- Ensure that transitions to new spaces or activities are calm and predictable.
- Avoid power struggles. Create and offer choices that are acceptable to both you and your students.
- Use gentle, affirming language and gestures. Use an even tone, low to moderate volume, and open posture. Stand shoulder to shoulder, sit or squat at eye level, and avoid sudden gestures. Avoid touch.
- Know what "safe places" are available to students who need a place to calm down. Think of ways you can gently encourage students to use these spaces when needed.
- Build opportunities for success into various settings, academic and social.
- Help your students set and achieve personal goals. Create short and long-term goals, methods for completion, and acknowledgements for success.
- Devote time to teach students skills to identify and manage their emotions. Students need to learn coping skills to manage situations that become overwhelming. Follow the links on this site for ideas <http://www.pbisworld.com/tier-1/teach-coping-skills/>.

- **Collaborate and Consult:**

- Work collaboratively with your school-based mental health team (psychologist, social worker, and counselor). Keep one another abreast of important changes in behavior, relationships, academic functioning, or other concerns. Work together to develop and implement classroom appropriate interventions.
- Work collaboratively with families, keeping in mind that many students have non-traditional family structures. Communicate with families about students' current functioning and progress, as well as interventions that have been helpful. Ask families what interventions may have been helpful in other environments.

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- **Be Informed:**
  - Remain aware of important events such as anniversaries (e.g. of a death). Proactively consider how these events may influence a student's feelings or behaviors and develop thoughtful plans that are flexible and attentive to their needs.
  - Know your students' academic and social strengths and weaknesses. Praise their strengths in the moment and give them strategies to address weaknesses. Consult with other staff members about interventions, relying on their different areas of expertise.
  - Be mindful when developing assignments with themes such as "family" or "memories." Consider allowing students to choose an alternate assignment or to work collaboratively with you to modify the task.
  - Remind the student that they can talk with school-based mental health staff (psychologist, social worker, or counselor) and show them how to access these individuals.
  - Talk to school-based mental health staff (psychologist, social worker, or counselor) about classroom-appropriate techniques that can be taught to students for managing overwhelming emotions (e.g. deep breathing). Encourage your students to use these techniques in the moment.
- **Develop Relationships and Foster Community:**
  - Increase Resiliency by providing students the opportunity to build strong relationships with at least one competent, caring adult who can serve as a positive role model.
  - Consider pairing the student with supportive peers who model healthy, appropriate coping skills.
  - Provide opportunities for your student to give back by helping others.
  - Provide age appropriate opportunities to have fun and "be a kid."
  - Remember that all students have strengths. Find them and build upon them.
- **If a Student Uses Challenging or Difficult Behaviors:**
  - Do not resort to shaming or isolating punishment.
  - Be mindful of your physical presence and tone of voice. Adults often react strongly to aggressive, disrespectful, or otherwise challenging behaviors. By remaining calm and neutral in your tone and posture, you remain in control of the situation and model appropriate behavior for your student.
  - Consider what might have caused the student's behavior, beyond what is obvious to an observer. Ask the student questions in a compassionate manner.
  - Listen carefully, without interrupting. Summarize the student's statements in a supportive manner and ask if you have understood correctly.
  - Avoid passing judgment, offering advice, or becoming overly reassuring.
  - Offer water and suggest some basic relaxation techniques (e.g. deep breathing) to help the student regain composure and return to the moment. Some ideas:  
[http://kidshealth.org/parent/cancer\\_center/feelings/relaxation.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/cancer_center/feelings/relaxation.html)

Adapted from "Understanding Trauma in Students and Youth,"  
Fairfax County Trauma Informed Community Network (2015).

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- Validate your student's thoughts/feelings. Offer choices for appropriate ways to remove themselves from the situation or manage unacceptable behavior. Calmly request that they choose from one of several clear, easy options.
- Remember that the behavior in question is not driven by logic. The student is in flight, fight or freeze mode and survival responses are taking over. Try some de-escalation techniques to help them manage their aggression and calm down. Check out this video to see how to pull some of these ideas together.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGn1bx7ZZUY>
- **If a Student Discloses their Experience:**
  - Use key phrases to validate and normalize their experience.
    - "I care about you. How can I help?"
    - "This can be really hard. You might want to talk with someone."
    - "It makes sense that you are feeling this way."
    - "I can help you find help."
    - "I am here for you when you are ready for help."
  - Do not ask for details regarding traumatic or past experiences.
  - Do not investigate or assume the worst.
  - Stay in your role and reach out to others for help!
  - Initiate a referral to the school psychologist, school social worker, or counselor. Facilitate the new relationship by offering to introduce your student to this staff member.
  - *Know when an immediate mental health referral is required. If the student discusses suicide, a desire to harm others, abuse/neglect, or cannot calm, do not leave them alone. Request that your psychologist, social worker, or counselor come to the room immediately.*